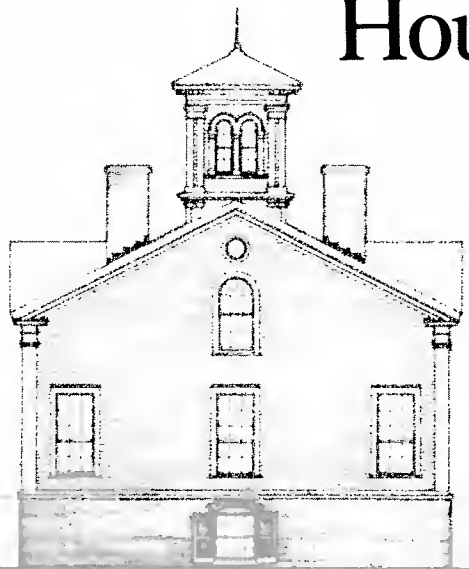
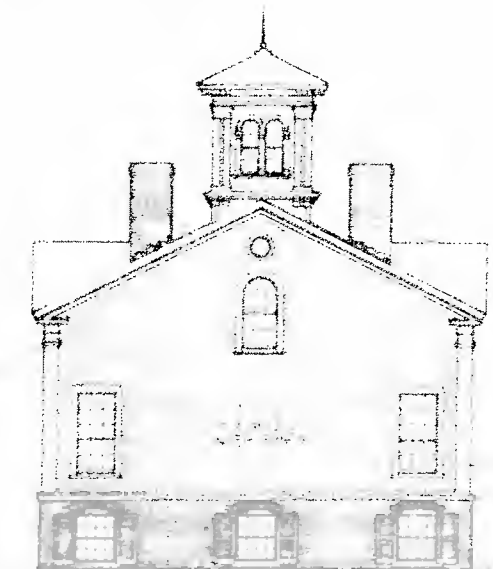


# Henry B. Clarke House



Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks



CITY OF CHICAGO  
Jane M. Byrne, Mayor

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(Cover) These drawings were prepared by the Historic American Buildings Survey in 1935.



(Bob Thall, photographer)

*The Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from those qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.*

*The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. As part of this study, the Commission's staff prepares detailed documentation on each potential landmark. This public information brochure is a synopsis of various research materials compiled as part of the designation procedure.*

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## Henry B. Clarke House

1855 South Indiana Avenue

The oldest building in Chicago was built in 1837 at what is now 16th Street and Michigan Avenue. It was moved to 45th Street and Wabash Avenue in 1872 and relocated to its present site in 1977.

The Henry B. Clarke House, frequently called the Widow Clarke House, is Chicago's oldest building. It was probably built in 1837, only a few years after the departure of the Indians from the Chicago area and at a time when Chicago was preparing for incorporation as a city. The handsome Greek Revival house thus encompasses almost the entire history of the city from its beginnings to the present. The Clarke House, located a short distance south of the present downtown area, appears to have been modeled on the fine house that the first mayor of Chicago, William B. Ogden, was then building on Ontario Street, several miles north of the Clarke property. The Ogden house was destroyed in the Chicago Fire of 1871, as were most of the structures in the city. The Clarke House is thus

the only surviving structure from the earliest period of the city's history. The Clarke House is also the only full record still in existence of the earliest construction methods used in Chicago.

The house was built by Henry Brown Clarke, who arrived in Chicago in 1835 at the age of 33. As a merchant in Utica, New York, Clarke had heard of the economic promise of Chicago from his brother-in-law, Charles Walker, who was engaged in the shipment of guns, boots, and leather to the frontier town. The two men both came to Chicago in the same year not only to seek their fortunes but also to buy land and settle in "the West." Clarke had been married in 1827 to Caroline Palmer, and his wife and their three young children soon followed him to Chicago.

In June of 1835, Clarke bought twenty acres of land and acquired an interest in the remainder of a quarter-section of land along the south shore of Lake Michigan, reputedly for the price of \$15,000. The larger tract was bordered by the lake on the east and what are today Michigan Avenue on the west, 16th Street on the north, and 22nd Street on the south. Clarke prospered quickly and began planning to build a large house. For the site he chose a section of his land on what is now Michigan Avenue in the vicinity of 1700 south. To the west stretched the nearly limitless prairie with its tall grasses and plentiful game. An old Indian trail running along the beaches, dunes, and sloughs of the shore provided the only access to Clarke's land from the town of Chicago. The nearest house was about a mile and a half to the north.

#### *The Style and Construction of the Clarke House*

The Clarkes apparently knew what they wanted in a house. In a letter to a relative back East, Mrs. Clarke wrote of the "good" houses that would soon be built in Chicago:

The buildings are now mostly small and look as though they had been put up as quickly as possible, many of them are what they call here Balloon [sic] houses, that is built of boards entirely--not a stick of timber in them, except the sills...

The "balloon" house to which Mrs. Clarke referred was in fact one of Chicago's major contributions to architectural history. A balloon frame was built of lightweight two-by-four wooden boards fastened together with machine-made, inexpensive nails that were then becoming widely available. This type of framing system, which looked so flimsy to early viewers that they thought it would blow away like a balloon, could be built more quickly and cheaply than a traditional hand-shaped timber frame. The technique swept the country and continues to be the dominant method of building small frame structures today.

The Clarkes' house was to be large and have a heavy timber frame. In style it was to be an imposing Greek revival structure, not only resembling the handsome Greek revival Ogden house, but also many of the "good" houses in upstate New York where the Clarkes had lived before moving to Chicago. The Greek revival style flourished in

America from about 1820 to 1860, appearing first in cities on the Eastern seaboard and then spreading gradually west as the young nation expanded. In the 1830s Chicago was experiencing an economic boom, part of the rapid growth of the country that occurred during Andrew Jackson's presidency, 1829 to 1837. America was then a young nation seeking its own identity, and its increasing prosperity enabled the country to realize its ambitions. The words of writer James McConkey, about another Greek revival house, apply also to the Clarke House: "...a dream of order and balance and proportion set down in a rude wilderness to represent the original owner's sense of himself and what he could achieve as well as a spiritual attitude that justified his striving." Excited by the idea that their own governmental ideals resembled those of ancient Greece, Americans saw the Greek revival style as an expression of their developing national character.

Prior to the emergence of the Greek revival as the style of choice, American architecture had been based largely on European styles which themselves derived primarily from classical Roman precedents. Both the Georgian and Federal styles, which prevailed from the early eighteenth century through the early nineteenth, were based on these precedents. By the 1820s, Americans were looking to other sources for inspiration. Beginning in the second half of the eighteenth century, accurate knowledge of the differences between Roman and Greek forms emerged, primarily as a result of archeological explorations. *The Antiquities of Athens*, published in England, contained engraved illustrations of classical Greek buildings and had an important effect on encouraging the use of Greek architectural elements. Joined to this new knowledge of antiquity was the sympathetic American response to the Greek Revolution of the early 1820s. There was an understandable identification with this war of independence from the Turks, and relief funds were sent from American towns to Greece. These two influences combined in America to produce a desire to emulate the Greek traditional forms, and classical Greek decorative elements were used to create a distinctively American style.

**Four stately columns mark the entrance to the Clarke House.**  
(Bob Thall, photographer)



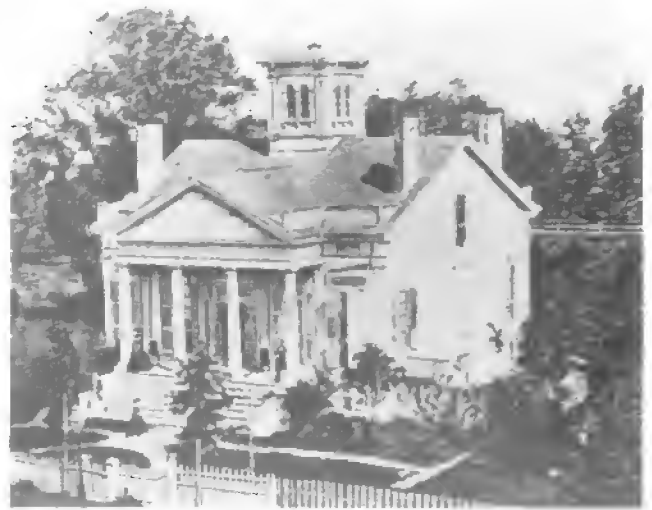
The original classical Greek buildings were constructed of cut stone blocks: rectangular ones for walls, and round, stacked drums of stone for columns. In America, Greek revival structures were often made of wood and brick. A columned portico, or porch, topped by a triangular roof shape, or pediment, was the most prominent feature of both the classical temple and its wooden American counterpart. Nineteenth-century visitors to America marveled at the white "Greek" temples that appeared in the cities and dotted the countryside. When Alexis de Tocqueville, a French philosopher, traveled to America in 1831, he remarked on "a number of little white marble palaces, some of them in classical architectural style." Upon closer examination he found they were all of whitewashed brick with columns of painted wood. These wood and brick Greek revival buildings were elegant in an understated way.

When Mayor Ogden decided to build his house, he brought a New York architect, John Mills Van Osdel, to Chicago to design it. Van Osdel remained in Chicago and became the city's first and one of its most noted architects. The suggestion has been made that Van Osdel may have also designed the Clarke House, but there is no confirmation of this speculation. Whatever the provenance of the house, William H. Bushnell, in his *Biographical Sketches of Early Settlers*, published in 1876, emphasized the similarity of the two houses: "The building [Clarke House] was fashioned after and to a large degree was a reproduction of that of the first mayor of Chicago, with a broad pillared porch; inviting, comfortable, substantial and a marked object in the almost wilderness of the prairie."

The Clarke House may have been built by a local carpenter using readily available pattern books or builders' guides. Such books provided floor plans for Greek revival and other styles of houses, drawings of moldings, staircases, and other details as well as practical suggestions on the use of wood, stone, and other materials. With such guidance, a skilled carpenter could produce a fashionable, well designed home. A. T. Andreas, in the first volume of his *History of Chicago*, wrote that the Clarke House was built by John Campbell Rye, a carpenter. Nothing further is known of Rye, but he may have been the John C. Rue listed among carpenters working in Chicago in 1839 in the book *Industrial Chicago: The Building Interests*, published in 1891. The house the Clarks built, however, is far from a stereotypical pattern book house.

### *The House the Clarks Built*

For their own home, the Clarks apparently considered the balloon frame unsubstantial and temporary, and so they built a timber frame house, the kind Mrs. Clarke considered a "good" house. The Clarke House thus demonstrates the survival of traditional construction techniques in which logs, roughly squared, are firmly held together by mortise and tenon joints: the tenon, or tongue, of one timber is fitted into a matching slot, or mortise, in the other, both laboriously cut to fit. Wooden pegs are driven into the joints to prevent slippage. Thus built, the Clarke House has withstood time, two fires, and two moves.



As the only early image of the house, this 1850s daguerrotype (a process that makes a reverse image of the subject) was very important in the restoration of the exterior.

(Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)

The strong frame is covered on the exterior by horizontal clapboards. The interior surfaces are finished with hand-split lath and plaster. To make the lath, a long thin section of a log was split repeatedly at either end and fastened to the wall. Each separate lath could then be pulled down, in the manner of an accordion, and nailed to the vertical wall studs. The result, when filled with a rough coat of plaster and then a smooth finish coat, was strong and enduring. Visitors to the house today can see the original construction system through an open panel in the wall of an upstairs bedroom.

The Clarke House, in its general proportions and mass, in its floor plan, ornament, and detailing is in the American Greek revival tradition. As in the ancient Greek temple, the facade is commanded by a large portico supported by tall columns and a well proportioned pediment. The Clarke House columns appear to have been modeled from a simple Roman Doric prototype rather than from Greek precedents. A parapet or low ornamental railing defines the edge of the roof. The house is crowned by an unusual and somewhat Italianate cupola and finial. The cupola was added to the house in the 1850s, probably in an attempt to update the house in the fashion of the ante-bellum years.

The symmetry and openness of the house are underscored by the placement and design of the door and window openings. The front door is tall, important, and welcoming, with its transom and side lights divided by delicate mullions. On either side of the door are two windows, reaching from the floor almost to the ceiling, and seeming to invite stepping from window to portico. Their sashes are triple-hung, with six panes of glass in each sash. Corner pilasters and ornamental cornices above the door and windows increase the feeling of grandeur. The north and south sides of the house are dramatized by three first-floor windows with six-over-six sashes and by a handsome arched window at the middle of the second floor. On the south side of the

house, the central first-floor window was added only for symmetry; it is not cut through to the interior and serves only as an element of design. All the windows have shutters that not only contribute to the overall design but were also part of a highly effective 1830s cooling system.

As in most Greek revival houses, there is a wide central hall. The hall, with its graceful walnut-railed staircase and wallpaper printed to resemble cut stone, provided an elegant entry to the house from the east and the west. Because of the openness of the hall, it was badly damaged by a fire that swept up from the basement furnace shortly before the house was moved in 1977 to its present location. The woodwork was deeply charred and might have been wholly destroyed had it not been for the multiple layers of paint that protected the wood. Other rooms, particularly those at the northeast corner, also suffered serious damage.

On the south side of the hall is a spacious double parlor that can be divided into two rooms by sliding doors. The east room of the double parlor, with its high ceilings, long windows, and deeply carved woodwork, served as the family's parlor; the similar west room was used as a dining room. In this formal setting the finishes and ornament are more elaborate than in any other part of the house. The fireplace mantels, doors, and window frames are all in the Greek revival style, and the mantels in both rooms are finished in a hand-grained black and gold imitation marble.

**Shortly before the Clarke House was to be moved to its present location, a fire badly damaged the interior of the structure. The hallway and stairs, where the damage was particularly severe, were protected from complete destruction by many layers of paint.**

(Courtesy of the Department of Public Works, City of Chicago)



When the house was undergoing its recent renovation, the most exacting research, sometimes working through as many as twenty-seven layers of paint, revealed a rich though quiet original color scheme. Two sections of the parlor ceiling, divided by a band of beading, were painted two shades of gray-green. Stronger colors were used on the band of ornament at the top of the walls and on the ceiling medallion from which an elaborate brass chandelier was suspended. The floral elements of the medallion were painted in intense but muted shades of blue, green, pink, grey, and brown, highlighted with touches of gold and encircled by gold leaves.

On the second floor are six bedrooms, the middle room on either side of the hall being distinguished by a tall arched window. Also on the second floor is another element in the cooling system of the house. In the ceiling over the stairwell and hall is a hand-adjustable "wagon wheel" window opening to the cupola above. When this window was opened in the summer, the ventilation through the cupola, combined with excellent cross ventilation throughout the house, kept the hall and most of the house cool and comfortable on even the hottest summer days. A small steep staircase leads from the second floor hall to the cupola.



**Careful research aided in the restoration of the house, which is decorated in the style of the 1830s and 1840s.**

(Hedrich-Blessing, photographers)

### *The Clarke Family*

After the Clarke family arrived in Chicago in 1835, Clarke not only acquired the land he wanted but also became a partner in the wholesale hardware firm of Jones, King and Company. The firm dealt in the construction, farming, and trapping materials and implements that were in great demand in the rapidly growing city of Chicago and throughout the Midwest.

The Chicago in which the Clarks were settling was still a small frontier town. In a letter to a member of her family, Caroline Clarke wrote: "I am far better pleased with Chicago than I expected. The situation is, I think, very pleasant and the town is laid out handsomely. When the streets come to be built up with good houses...it will be very pleasant indeed."

Certainly enough people to build future "good" houses were arriving in Chicago. The influx had started in 1833 when the departure of the Indians opened all of the Chicago area to settlement. At that time the population was 550 people; in 1837, the year Chicago was incorporated as a city, the population had risen to 4,000. At least some of the necessary services for a developing community were becoming available. "Good tasting" water was brought in from the lake and sold by the barrel for a price Mrs. Clarke considered nothing "in Chicago's great way of doing business."

In the fast-rising Chicago way, Clarke had also become a director of the city's first bank, the Illinois State Bank, which had opened in 1834 at the corner of LaSalle and South Water streets. Clarke's brother-in-law Charles Walker started shipping wheat from Chicago to New York and, it was said, was well on his way to becoming one of the city's first millionaires. The expansive years of the early 1830s ended in the panic of 1837 when almost overnight the Illinois State Bank failed and the other businesses in which Clarke was involved foundered. Clarke did not have the money to finish furnishing his new house in the country.

In these hard times, Clarke turned to farming, dairying, and hunting. Alice L. Barnard, a teacher who lived with the Clarkes, wrote to a friend that the unfurnished front parlor was hung with "half a dozen deer, hundreds of snipe, plover and quail, and dozens of prairie chickens and ducks." The game was used for the family or sold. The first city directory in Chicago, published in 1844, still listed Clarke as "farmer, lake shore below Michigan Avenue." Economic conditions improved during the 1840s. Clarke served as city clerk from 1846 to 1848 for a salary of \$600 and fees. During the decade the Clarke family continued to grow and by 1849, there were six Clarke children: James, Mary, Robert, Caroline, Edward, and Cyrus. In 1849, however, the Clarkes again suffered the same ills as the city. After a severe winter, spring flooding apparently contaminated the city's drinking water. Cholera broke out in epidemic proportions. Henry Clarke, then 47 years old, contracted the disease and died on July 23.

**In contrast to the wide front portico, the square rear porch is much simpler in design.**

(Bob Thall, photographer)



**In 1935, the Historic American Buildings Survey, a project of the federal government, recorded the house in photographs and measured drawings. Much of the detailing was gone, including the front portico which had been removed when the house was moved in 1872.**

(Historic American Buildings Survey photograph)

By the 1850s, the city was beginning to spread close to the once remote Clarke land. The State Street stagecoach made daily trips to the city limits at 22nd Street. Mrs. Clarke then subdivided and certified "Clarke's Addition to Chicago." The twenty Clarke acres were divided into four blocks and the blocks into lots which were then sold. The Clarke family sustained its financial position, and in the years before the Civil War, the cupola was added to the house. Michigan Avenue was opened all the way to the Clarke House, and a favorite Sunday excursion was a carriage drive to see what had come to be called the Widow Clarke mansion.

In 1860, Mrs. Clarke traveled to Buffalo, New York, probably to visit her late husband's youngest brother Cyrus. While in Buffalo, Mrs. Clarke died, and her body was returned to Chicago for burial. When Graceland Cemetery opened later that year, both Clarkes and their eldest son James, who had died in 1856, were reburied in a Clarke family plot. The Clarke's youngest child, Cyrus, was only twelve years old when his mother died. Mary, the oldest of the surviving children, and her husband Frank B. Williams moved into the Clarke House to care for Cyrus and the other children.

By the war years of the 1860s, the pioneer era in Chicago had ended. The village had grown into a city of more than 30,000 people. The Clarke children continued to live in the house their parents had built until 1872 when it was sold.

#### *Other Owners of the Clarke House*

John Chrimes, a tailor, and his wife Lydia purchased the Clarke House in 1872. The previous year, the great fire of 1871 had spread south through the downtown area until the wind veered and the fire moved north. The Clarke House thus escaped destruction. Fearful of another fire, and wanting to get an ailing child out to the purer air of the country,

Chrimes had the Clarke House moved twenty-eight blocks south and one block west to 4526 South Wabash Avenue. In the move, the pillared front portico was removed.

Chrimes and his family, his daughter and her family, and two granddaughters successively occupied the house from 1872 to 1945. John Chrimes' daughter Mary married William H. Walter, and during their residence in the house she took a great interest in its history. The Walters' two daughters, Lydia and Laura, both graduates of the University of Chicago and teachers in public schools, in their turn appreciated the historic significance of the house. When it became too large for their needs, they urged the City of Chicago to acquire it. Their efforts were unsuccessful. When Bishop Louis Henry Ford and the St. Paul Church of God in Christ offered to buy the house in 1941, the Chrimes' granddaughters accepted.

The bishop and his congregation built a church on land adjoining the house, using the Clarke House for offices, schoolrooms, and social events. Well aware of the history of the house, the congregation made every effort to maintain it in good condition. Eventually, the church needed the land for other purposes. The City of Chicago, under the leadership of Mayor Richard J. Daley and through the office of First Deputy Commissioner of Public Works Elizabeth McLean, bought the house in 1977. The decision to save Chicago's oldest house was influenced by the availability of an appropriate site for its relocation. With grants from the State of Illinois Open Space and Land Acquisition Act for historic and urban areas in 1974 and 1975, the City had purchased some of the original Clarke House land for a Prairie Avenue Historic District along Prairie Avenue between 18th and Cullerton streets. The Clarke House could be relocated on the east side of Indiana Avenue between 1800 and 1900 south, approximately one block south and one block east of its original site, and it could face east toward the lake as it had in 1837.

In 1941, the Clarke House became the property of St. Paul Church of God in Christ. The church used the building for a parsonage, for church offices, and for meeting rooms. This photograph, probably taken in 1951, shows the work done by the members of the congregation to maintain the house.

(Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)



### *The Restoration of the Clarke House*

Thorough architectural and historical studies of the house and its moving were ordered. There was no way to move the house to its new site without encountering the elevated train structure which had not existed at the time of the move south. The office of the City Architect and Wilbert R. Hasbrouck, historical and architectural consultant, studied ways of surmounting the obstacle of the El. Among the possibilities considered and rejected were slicing the house into sections; an airlift by helicopter; an overnight removal and replacement of an El span over one street; and an excavation that would allow the house to move under the El tracks.

The decision was made to lift the 120-ton structure over the El. The house was picked up intact and transported on wheeled dollies to the point where the El crosses 44th Street between Calumet and Prairie avenues. There the house was slowly jacked up twenty-seven feet on wooden cribs until it stood slightly above the El tracks. At exactly one minute after midnight on Sunday, December 4, 1977, when El traffic was at a minimum, all train service on the line was halted. Temporary rails were laid across the tracks, cables were attached to the house, and trucks on the street below pulled the house slowly across the tracks. Despite the very cold weather, about 2,000 people gathered to watch as the house moved over the tracks and onto another set of cribs on the east side of the tracks. Soon the trains were running past the house once more.

In the bitterly cold weather, the hydraulic equipment that would have lowered the house froze. When the weather finally moderated on December 18, the house was brought down and moved to the Prairie Avenue Historic District and placed on the excavation prepared for it. The foundation was then built up to fit the idiosyncrasies of a very old structure.

Moving the Clarke House from 4526 South Wabash Avenue to 1855 South Indiana Avenue required lifting the house over the tracks of the elevated train at 44th Street between Calumet and Prairie avenues.

(Courtesy of the Department of Public Works, City of Chicago)





The Clarke House was to be not only the embodiment of Chicago's past and a historical record in itself but also a public museum. Steel reinforcements were added to floors and the staircase. Air conditioning and security equipment was concealed in walls and fireplace flues. An elevator was added in former closet space. The basement was designed to include offices, bathrooms, and a museum display room. Daniel Majewski, Assistant City Architect, was in charge of all phases of the restoration of the Clarke House.

All of the original Clarke family furnishings had long since disappeared. The Colonial Dames of America in the State of Illinois undertook the refurnishing of the house as part of the organization's national historic houses program. Furniture of the target restoration period of 1836 to 1850 was contributed by members. Robert A. Furhoff, consultant to the Colonial Dames and to the City of Chicago, studied the evidence of original paint colors and wallpapers, bits of which were found under the woodwork. His research made possible an accurate recreation of the interiors as they appeared in the 1830s and 1840s.

The Clarke House has mirrored Chicago's growth and development for almost a century and a half, through the lives of its residents: the Clarkes, the Chrimes, and the Walters; and through the new uses for which it was adapted by St. Paul Church of God in Christ and now by the City of Chicago in conjunction with the Chicago Architecture Foundation and the Colonial Dames of America in the State of Illinois. The house, the only surviving example of Greek Revival architecture in Chicago, is a unique connection to the decade in which Chicago was incorporated first as a town in 1833 and later as a city in 1837, the year Henry Clarke built his impressive home on the prairie.

**This bedroom on the first floor of the house was as carefully restored as the parlor. The house, which is open to the public, now presents a picture of life in Chicago in the earliest years of the city's history.**  
(Hedrich-Blessing, photographers)



*The restoration of the Henry B. Clarke House was supported by three mayors of the City of Chicago. The work was begun by Mayors Richard J. Daley and Michael A. Bilandic. The completion of the project was undertaken by Mayor Jane M. Byrne and her staff, in particular Commissioner of the Department of Public Works Jerome R. Butler, Jr.; Commissioner of the Department of Planning Martin R. Murphy; Daniel Majewski, Assistant City Architect; and Stephen Roman, Coordinating Planner.*

*An unusual combination of private and public organizations joined with the City to save and restore the Clarke House. Support came from Chicago Community Trust and other foundations, from federal and state agencies, from the Colonial Dames of America in the State of Illinois, and especially from the Chicago Architecture Foundation.*

*The project was directed by the Chicago Architecture Foundation's Prairie Avenue Historic District Committee, headed by Ruth Moore Garbe. Other members of the committee are:*

*representing the Chicago Architecture Foundation—*

*Rory Shanley Brown  
Mary Carr  
Cathleen Concannon  
Michael S. Corbett  
Marian A. Despres  
Benjamin Weese  
Ralph Youngren*

*representing the Colonial Dames of America in the State of Illinois—*

*Bertha Alling Brown  
Elizabeth Shorey Graettinger  
Marjorie Banks Grannis  
Ginny Hulbert Hoyle  
Elizabeth Kepler Savage*

*representing the City of Chicago—*

*Daniel Majewski  
William M. McLenahan  
Stephen Roman*

*and descendants of original Prairie Avenue residents—*

*Barbara Coleman Donnelley  
Thomas Keith  
Barry Sears*